

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS –



HILLSBOROUGH TOWNSHIP HEALTH DEPARTMENT COVID-19 VULNERABLE POPULATIONS ASSESSMENT

SUBMITTED TO THE NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH ON APRIL 15, 2021

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In December 2020, the Hillsborough Township Health Department (HTHD) was awarded grant funding from the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) – Office of Local Public Health’s (OLPH) Strengthening Local Public Health Capacity Program through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) federal COVID-19 response. As part of the program, Hillsborough conducted a COVID-19 Vulnerable Population Assessment of Needs (Assessment) during Winter and Spring 2021. The Assessment was conducted by the HTHD Vulnerable Populations Outreach Coordination (VPOC) team and submitted to the NJDOH on April 15, 2021. As part of the Assessment, the HTHD engaged various individuals and groups throughout the township over four months to learn how COVID-19 had impacted the community, in particular at-risk vulnerable populations. The findings will help Hillsborough and NJDOH develop a plan for COVID-19 targeted outreach, prevention, partnerships with community stakeholders, vaccinations, testing, contact tracing, containment, quarantine, and linkage to support services and primary care for vulnerable populations more effectively.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative and qualitative data referenced within the Assessment applies to the municipalities served by the HTHD and includes Hillsborough, Millstone and Flagtown. Through community level data and direct information from various focus groups with community stakeholders, we identified “vulnerable populations” to be: people with an economic disadvantage, the elderly, infants, mothers with newborns, adolescents, school-age children, children who are in school remotely from home without adult supervision, families with children who have healthcare needs, grandparents who are guardians of grandchildren, people living in homeless shelters or temporary housing, long-term care settings, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, people living in group homes, Hispanic/Latino persons, Black/African-American persons, migrant workers, undocumented immigrants and people who are uninsured or underinsured.

In addition to collecting data to assess, prevent and manage the social and health impacts of COVID-19 in the community, the VPOC team collected information more broadly related to the social drivers of health. This included a discussion around the most significant challenges to health and wellbeing in the community, what services and resources are available and lacking for the most vulnerable community members and how best to communicate directly with community members about health and wellbeing resources. This additional information was collected and shared within our Assessment and with various community stakeholders with the goal of identifying existing barriers to achieving optimal health and wellbeing and tailoring health department services to address these needs.

The quantitative data in the Assessment include demographic information from multiple local, state and national databases, ALICE Report Data, demographic information from the Board of Education and the Hillsborough Township Police Department. The qualitative data was derived from a total of eight focus groups/discussions that were conducted by the VPOC team with Hillsborough Township community stakeholders between February-April 2021 and included principals from the Hillsborough School District, Boro SAFE (high school/community-based partnership for suicide prevention), childcare centers/nursery schools, the Township

Youth Services Commission, the Municipal Alliance, faith-based leaders and school nurses. Approximately 73 individuals participated.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

There have been a substantial number of emerging impacts on the community served by the HTHD. Some of the greatest vulnerable population impacts observed have been in the areas of health, education, employment, provision of human/social services, community resources and racial and ethnic disparities.

Health Impacts:

Individuals over age 65, especially those with underlying health conditions, have been shown to be at particular risk for severe health implications from COVID-19. In Hillsborough, seniors living in nursing, residential and rehabilitation centers have experienced high levels of COVID infection. Eighty-eight percent of deaths in Hillsborough have occurred in people ages 70 and above. Twenty-one percent of positive cases were among seniors over age 60. Although the number of positive cases was lower in the 65+ population as compared to younger people, mortality was significantly higher in the former. Our qualitative data found that seniors also experienced increased isolation due to multiple quarantines over the past year. Seniors who have difficulty accessing technology and/or are homebound have found it challenging to access the COVID vaccine. A recurring theme that was identified is the significant mental and emotional toll on children and adults, and the worst may not yet have been seen, especially for children who have been primarily in remote school and unable to see school counselors in person.

In our focus groups and consistent with what is occurring nationally, law enforcement and school counselors reported an increase in the number of investigations related to domestic/intimate partner violence. Some potential reasons for this include spending more time at home together during volatile and stressful situations such as unemployment, underemployment, virtual school and illness from COVID.

Many people with chronic illnesses delayed treatment at a physician's office or the hospital due to their fears of contracting COVID or not being able to return home if they were exposed to COVID in the hospital or another clinical setting. Others delayed diagnosis of previously unknown illnesses due to similar fears.

Educational Impacts:

The closing of public schools in Hillsborough has impacted children's education. Children with limited or no access to resources (broadband internet, computers/tablets, technology expertise, language barriers, etc.) are most at risk for suffering learning loss during a protracted period of school closure. Virtual schooling was met with limited success. Some families opted for virtual schooling due to fears of COVID spreading to other family members, particularly multi-generational households with elderly family members and/or who serve as caretakers of students. Students with learning disabilities with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) were disproportionately affected because it was a challenge fulfilling requirements of the IEP. Parents/caregivers who are essential workers and cannot work from home and have limited resources are especially affected as they are not able to function as parents/caregivers and primary teachers when school is conducted through virtual learning. Although remote learning sites like the YMCA were opened during COVID, the sites have not been adequate due to staffing, capacity issues and limited resources or accessibility to all families because of financial and transportation barriers.

School principals and Student Assistance Counselors reported distance-learning is not optimal and has had a significant negative impact on student success. Truancy was at an increased level during term periods most affected by COVID and school staff have had to conduct home visits to the homes of students with high truancy rates. School staff expressed concern about not having the capacity to conduct home visits to all of those families with truancy issues and requested the HTHD partner with them to expand the number of home visits of students who are chronically truant and/or underperforming in school. School staff also reported an increase in

disengaged and hard-to-reach students, describing the problem as “skyrocketing.” This has led to a surge in the number of middle school students who are failing every class.

School staff and principals also expressed concern about the lack of speakers of other languages besides English and Spanish among their staff. As a result, school principals found Urdu- and Gujarati-speaking families and families who speak other languages are struggling more.

Employment Impacts:

There was some indication of a shortage of essential workers in the most high-risk settings—congregate housing (senior care facilities, group homes, long-term care facilities, shelters, etc.) where staff have experienced high rates of COVID infections and had to miss work for prolonged periods. Most of these settings have been proactive with providing staff with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and in taking quarantine precautions but some have been more reactive. Although as of April 2021, about 70-75% of assisted living facilities’ staff in Hillsborough were fully vaccinated against COVID, there was one facility where only 30% of their staff were fully vaccinated. As of June 1st, Assisted Living Facilities are averaging about 78% vaccination rate of staff with a low of 66% and high of 84%.

Another employment sector that has been affected by COVID is early childhood education. One early childhood center (day care) closed permanently due to low enrollment of children. Other early childhood centers are struggling with low enrollment and have had to lay off/furlough staff. A challenge for public schools in Hillsborough is that some teachers and support staff are refusing to return to school in person due to fears of infection from children, especially younger ones who are not yet eligible for the COVID vaccine. Custodial staff of public schools have had hours cut and experienced layoffs/furloughs as well. Ramping up for complete live, in-person school in the fall will require coordination with the Board of Education, the HTHD, local community support agencies and families.

Fortunately, Hillsborough’s increased unemployment rates during the height of COVID were only temporary. In June 2020, they reached a high of 12.4% compared with 2.3% in June 2019. By December 2020, unemployment dropped to 5.5%. Consistent with national trends, women in Hillsborough have been disproportionately impacted by having to leave their jobs to stay at home for their children’s virtual schooling needs, even when their places of employment open for employees to return. Individuals in the service and retail sectors, housekeeping services and in the gig economy have experienced more sudden and unexpected unemployment. Due to immigration status, Latinos may face greater challenges to obtaining employment. Some are unaware of resources available to them and their families as they are experiencing unemployment for the first time. Our qualitative data also indicated there is a general lack of access to employment and workforce development services for young adults post-high school graduation.

Human/Social Services Impacts

Human/social services have been greatly impacted by COVID in our community, especially for vulnerable populations. Due to immigration status, Latinos may face greater barriers to accessing human and social services. Some service providers are not operating, operating at reduced hours or are not allowing walk-in and in-person services to clients, resulting in gaps in much-needed services to the community. In particular, school-based mental health was negatively impacted due to students not having more immediate access to school counselors. Since in-person counseling appointments have been limited or not offered during the 2020 and 2021 school year, virtual meetings have been made available. However, School Assistance Counselors and other school counselors reported that students do not attend virtual meetings as much and did not find them as efficacious. This may be due to a lack of privacy at home when speaking to counselors with more family members around. Community mental health agencies and private mental health practitioners report similar issues.

Community Resources Impacts

Hillsborough has experienced numerous COVID impacts on the community resources that are available. There has been a marked reduction in the availability of resources (access to group activities, commercial services, etc.),

a scarcity of some resources (healthcare, food and emergency supplies) and/or needs for resources that have not previously been required in this community in any significant capacity. In addition to a change in service hours and format to community services, there have been some challenges with virtual meetings for clients who initially did not have access to technology. All of the area food pantries, pop-up food pantries and food banks reported an increase in clients seeking food during much of 2020 and 2021. These food pantries all reported being well-stocked on a regular basis and sharing food, resources, supplies and information with each other. Hillsborough Township Social Services expanded the food pantry and distributed information regarding COVID safety precautions, testing and vaccination.

Faith-based leaders shared information indicating there was an increase in social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression and family discord among their congregants. Many faith-based organizations (FBO's) transitioned quickly to online/virtual services; however, the faith community relies on personal interactions for spiritual, emotional and physical support, making this transition somewhat challenging to some. When possible, some FBO's continued in-person services with significant limits on the numbers attending and strict protective guidelines. They also contributed to addressing food insecurity in the community by opening pop-up food pantries and food and supplies deliveries to the elderly and infirmed—extending to individuals not involved with their own congregations.

Ethnic and Racial Disparities and Impacts

Taken together, the abovementioned impacts have negatively impacted Latinos in the community more than any other group. Service providers and educators consistently expressed concern for Latinos and how they are being affected by COVID and other social and health impacts. As the population with the lowest income per household in the community, stakeholders described the Latino population as “really struggling” economically during COVID. Educators equally reported Latino children and youth are the students who have been struggling the most during the pandemic and their parents and families have typically been less comfortable with allowing their children to go to school during COVID. One possible reason is older children must often look after their younger siblings if their parents are essential workers and cannot work from home.

Systemically, community stakeholders highlighted there is a general lack of Latino and Black representation in schools and in the community, from a leadership and decision-making perspective. School staff also stated language continues to be a barrier for some of the Spanish-speaking families, as well as access to high-speed internet that is necessary to participate in virtual school from home.

Barriers to the COVID-19 Vaccine

As of June 1, 2021, 62% of individuals age 12+ in Hillsborough had completed a COVID vaccine course and 12% had initiated a course. Although Hillsborough has higher COVID vaccination rates compared to the state average (52% completed vaccine course and 11% initiated course), there are some ethnic disparities worth highlighting. Among the 62% of individuals who have completed a COVID vaccine course in Hillsborough, 5% are Black persons, 9% are Latino or Hispanic persons, 18% are Asian persons and 66% are White persons. Previously, during Winter and Spring 2021, homebound seniors and municipal workers in Hillsborough faced barriers to accessing the vaccine. Some municipal workers were facing challenges in vaccine registration because they did not have the time to constantly monitor vaccine registration and appointment sites or to go to them if they are during work hours. The disproportionate lack of access to the vaccine among Hispanic/Latino persons, Black/African-American persons, homebound seniors and municipal workers underscored the necessity to prioritize a more equitable COVID response in Hillsborough. Based on the data, the HTHD and partners should prioritize conducting additional and targeted outreach to these populations, as well as opportunities to address any perceived concerns related to the vaccine and to access the vaccine. In this work, it is paramount that we recognize the historical and current structural racism, ableism and other forms of oppression that have made it difficult for some communities, in particular ethnic minoritized persons, the homebound and elderly and persons with disabilities, to fully trust the public health, medical and scientific community.

In response, the HTHD, in conjunction with the Montgomery Health Department began conducting free vaccination clinics throughout the community in May and they will be ongoing for the foreseeable future. The HTHD is also collaborating with the Hillsboro Pharmacy to provide closed vaccination pods for businesses that have a larger representation of Black/African-American and Hispanic/Latino employees. To date, the HTHD has conducted vaccine clinics in the municipal building after work hours and on weekends on May 15th and 27th. The HTHD VPOC team has conducted and will expand outreach and recruitment to register more community members, with a focus on the vulnerable populations that face greater challenges in accessing the vaccine as described above. The HTHD VPOC team is also collaborating with different apartment complexes to bring the vaccine to their tenants.

Looking Ahead

To address COVID misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, the HTHD is planning to conduct educational and informational presentations throughout the community. We know from our community sources which areas and demographics we should prioritize, which include some high-risk, vulnerable groups and individuals as discussed above. We are currently developing a program using some of the CDC's and the Massachusetts State Department of Health's educational information and guides on COVID hesitancy and how to conduct a community forum on this topic and will adapt it to the Hillsborough community. Various partners have already indicated an interest in participating in such workshops and presentations. Community stakeholders have indicated a preference for an online/virtual educational/information session as well as information that can be shared electronically.

The HTHD will also continue to support vaccination clinics with other partners and focus on those businesses/companies with lower vaccination rates. More broadly in the community, the HTHD will include preparing and sharing emergency preparedness and public health crisis documents and sharing available community resources through our partners.

Through our work with the various stakeholders who participated in our focus groups in the Spring, we gained an understanding of people's interest in staying involved with HTHD's COVID response and community health work. In response to this, the HTHD is forming a COVID-19 Collaborative to address key issues related to COVID, health disparities and other factors affecting vulnerable populations in Hillsborough. It will consist of a public-private partnership of local stakeholders and concerned citizens. Members will include representatives from community organizations, faith-based groups, local businesses, schools, non-profit groups and interested individuals. The HTHD will lead the group, funded by a State grant. The Collaborative will meet monthly to assess needs and priorities, gather input and plan initiatives, with the first meeting scheduled for Tuesday, June 29th at 3pm.

Additionally, the HTHD VPOC team has collected a wide variety of different types of data and will continue to do so. From this, we are poised to develop a comprehensive action plan to meet the needs of the vulnerable populations in Hillsborough. In conjunction with the HTHD's diverse community partners, including community-serving and social service agencies, the school district, residential facilities, FBO's, etc., the HTHD will have the opportunity to meet the needs of many of those in Hillsborough who are vulnerable.